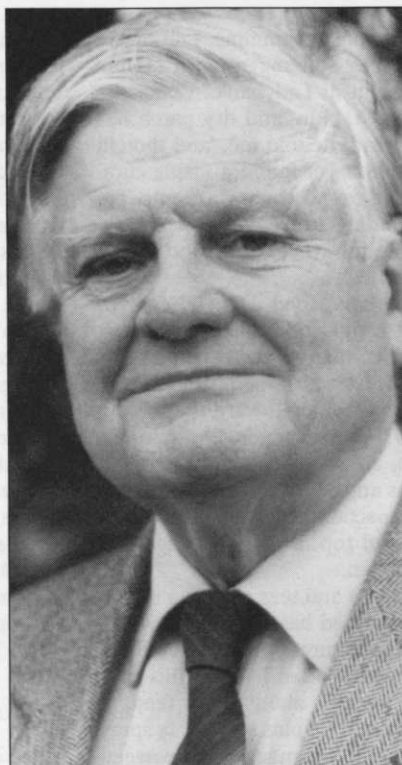


JIM ARTHUR considers the greenkeeper's power to close courses and suggests ways of

A Winter's Tale



carpets. In other cases, where there is no will to change, there will be no change.

Clearly, there must be a lot of give and take. Not all of us are blessed with all-weather, free-draining links or heathland greens – and not all such favoured environments have good bent/fescue greens anyway! The culprit is, of course, annual meadow grass, which often became dominant as a result of the demand for nice green greens in the 1970s. Getting rid of annual meadow grass is easier said than done, but it can always be reduced. While it is easier to stop it getting into new greens in the first place, there are nevertheless countless cases where greens built many years ago without special under-drainage and on heavy clay soils are dom-

inantly *Agrostis* (bent) with, admittedly, some annual meadow grass but not enough to affect all year round excellence. It has been said that greenkeeping is a constant fight against annual meadow grass and one which we never quite win. But we can all attempt to improve. I have little patience with those who regard annual meadow grass with affection or even tolerance. One listens to talks about how this or that greenkeeper manages *Poa annua* successfully. The best are implementing a programme which, if carried out conscientiously and intensively, will in the long if not the short term reduce this wretched weed grass and swing greens to *Agrostis* – and often they do not realise this. Sadly too, the problem is aggravated by poor grass identification. I read with incredulity a report from an inexperienced adviser to a club I had advised for many years, that their greens were some of the best annual meadow grass greens he had seen – they were in fact at a conservative estimate about 75% *Agrostis* and the best all-year-round surfaces for miles around!

What then is the answer? It must of course depend on individual cases. Some greens, even on newly built courses, are so badly constructed that the essential free drainage which makes an improvement programme feasible could only be achieved by rebuilding. The first step must be intensive, deep, regular and frequent aeration all year round. This first rule of greenkeeping is so often not observed because members do not like to see the slits. 'Can't you leave the greens alone for

There is perhaps no more contentious point in the whole of golf – from the viewpoint of both players and course managers alike – than that of temporary greens. There can really be no rules to cover all situations, but we can at least agree that any greenkeeper worth his salt wants to keep his members – and visitors – on full greens for as many of the days of the year that severe frost and snow cover permit. The gap between desire and performance is sometimes wider than it needs to be.

A first step towards achieving this standard must be the education of the golfer – and the second the education of the greenkeeper. We have all met the character whose attitude is best expressed by the remark 'If we could only get rid of yon golfers altogether we would always have the course in perfect order'.

There is a world of difference between the situation where members turn up on a bright sunny frosty morning to discover the course closed, albeit temporarily, and that which was often the norm on many inland courses 20 years ago, when it was the rule rather than the exception for temporary greens to come into play from October until Easter. Often such greens were well prepared in advance – more often they were just a bit of fairway, preferably not on the actual approach to the green, mown out a week before the switch!

Part of the problem was the thatchy, soft, soggy annual meadow grass greens, which today are much rarer but in those days of

feed and water were the rule.

I well remember one Surrey downland course where there were two sets of temporary greens. The full greens were inches deep in thatch, dominated by *Poa annua* and literally unplayable in winter – the members liked soft lush holding greens in summer. On a set day in early autumn, the club came off full greens, for the next seven months, on to really excellent fescue-dominated greens of about 350 sq yds maintained all summer and even top dressed as well as regularly mown with the main greens. These greens were much better than the full greens – and much preferred by members, who however still failed to make the necessary mental connection. So proud were all concerned of these temporary greens that at the first sign of frost, play was switched to temporary temporary greens just cut out of the downland turf, on the other side of the green. And that is true! A few years, under a new head man, of intensive aeration, controlled irrigation and limited fertiliser treatment produced such an improvement in the full greens that they were playable most of the winter – and then we had a change of green committee and greenkeeper and with it a reversal to the bad old ways.

There can be no slick answers to this vexed question. In some cases the old greens have been mismanaged for so long that not even eternal optimists who share my views can improve them sufficiently to produce tolerable winter conditions without complete rebuilding of the greens on stone drainage

avoiding a golf club's 'winter of discontent'

five minutes' is the parrot cry, to which the only answer is 'Certainly, provided you keep off them'.

I am the first to admit that there are cases where one must come off the greens on to temporaries and not just for frost, though severe damage can be done by play on greens when the surface is thawing out and the soil an inch below frozen solid – when roots are sheared off and the damage lasts well into the growing season – just because a selfish few demand to play full greens under obviously unsuitable conditions.

There must be understanding and discipline. There is only one man who can and must close the course, if only because he has the knowledge and is first there in the morning, and he, of course, is the head greenkeeper. Equally, he must not abuse his powers and will want to keep his course open to the limit, if only as a matter of pride.

What really saddens me is an increasing tendency to say that we must learn to live with annual meadow grass. I can quote course after course on heavy clays – from Essex to the Welsh marches, from central Scotland to Wealden clays – where erstwhile bogs have been so improved that the *Agrostis*-dominant greens are often the best in the area, despite their poor history. Equally, I despair when I am told, as I was recently, of one Scottish inland course which I advised for many years, before I retired, where the head greenkeeper was as convinced as he was hard working and skilful and we as a team converted thatchy bogs to good bent greens, which 'under new management' have gone straight back to bogs and they are on 'temporaries' permanently from 1st October. All so avoidable and such a waste of our efforts and enthusiasms.

If you must have temporaries then I suppose it is sensible to prepare them well in

advance, but it is my experience that if you have such good temporaries, they will be used! Where it is at all feasible, I advise using a 10" hole cutter and sinking a hole cup in the base to one side of the approach – it is just as good a test of winter putting really!

There are many other dodges to keep players on full greens – such as pin placements nearest the next tee and rescinding Rule 34.3 about attending the flag under non-competitive winter play, to cutting two holes (one closed with a sorbo-rubber plug) so that the flag can be moved to spread wear when new holes could not be cut, but that is another story, and, I am the first to agree, these are not invariably applicable.

'The need for better winter conditions is increasing every year'

If switching to temporary greens arouses wrath, this is nothing to that caused by going onto tee mats. Clearly there will be circumstances where mats are unavoidable as a last resort, but even then much can be done by thoughtful construction and the use of pulverised bark paths to avoid the area all around being turned into a quagmire. There have also been successful results with movable (on wheels!) tee mats to reduce such traffic wear. The secret to keeping golfers on full tees over the winter is, of course, to have more teeing space. This is often easier said than done, especially on older courses on a restricted area, or where tees are tight up against boundaries.

Sadly, on many such courses, only recently

has there been any serious attempt to increase teeing space from the level which was just adequate 30 years ago, when there was in any case much less winter play.

On heavy land, especially, new tees should be constructed just as greens are, on under-drained and blinded stone carpets, with a free draining root zone, (which of course to save costs can be shallower than for greens (as we are not sinking hole cups in tees!). Such tees will naturally need irrigation, as they will be drought susceptible, if only to aid recovery after winter wear.

With new courses we talk of a minimum of 400m² for teeing space, as a matter of course. Tees, incidentally, should not be rectangular: round-ended tees are more natural looking and easier to mow with triplex mowers. The pro's and con's of single large tees, compared with several smaller ones could keep us going all night, but a major factor must be traffic to and from tees. If main tees and specially built winter tees are well separated (where this is possible), then the risk of thoughtless players walking over a tee out of play (whether the full tee rested in winter or the winter tee being renovated in spring) will be minimised.

I am fully aware that it is much easier to recommend than to put the recommendations into practice, but the need for better winter conditions is increasing each year with more winter play – certainly vastly more than even ten years ago. If we accept the need and agree the methods, then results will follow but many factors such as course layout, soil type, even budgets may limit the implementation. Above all we need education of golfers to accept temporary closures as unavoidable or where play in such circumstance would leave a lasting legacy. It is, in my view, up to greenkeepers to get such points over – and not to abuse the powers given to close courses when the need arises.

